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Publication date:
2017

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Nosch, M. L. B., Gaspa, S., & Michel, C. (2017). *Textile Terminologies, state of the art and new directions*. University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

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Gaspa, Salvatore; Michel, Cécile; and Nosch, Marie-Louise, "Textile Terminologies, State of the Art and New Directions" (2017). *Textile Terminologies from the Orient to the Mediterranean and Europe, 1000 BC to 1000 AD*. 5.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/texterm/5>

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In *Textile Terminologies from the Orient to the Mediterranean and Europe, 1000 BC to 1000 AD*, ed. Salvatore Gaspa, Cécile Michel, & Marie-Louise Nosch (Lincoln, NE: Zea Books, 2017), pp. 19-23.

doi:10.13014/K2H993CD

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Textile Terminologies, State of the Art and New Directions

Salvatore Gaspa, Cécile Michel, Marie-Louise Nosch

The first published volume dedicated to the diachronic study of ancient textile terminologies gathered contributions on Semitic and Indo-European studies based on texts dated mainly to the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC.¹ It provided a rich body of data and the first steps in elaborating a methodology of how to analyse textile terminologies and technologies according to various categories. Yet, it also highlighted the problems that were encountered in such studies. For example, some areas such as Greece, Italy, Anatolia and Italy are rich in texts providing numerous textile terms but do not yield many ancient textiles, which can be compared to the textile terminology. Likewise, other areas, such as Northern Europe and the Alpine region yield archaeological textiles but very few texts to document how the textiles were called.

Several technical words refer to ancient technologies, which are lost today, and thus difficult to understand for the modern scholar. The ancient vocabulary of colours and dye products is also often unclear to the modern reader. Moreover, translations of ancient texts do not always convey correctly the techniques and tools described in the texts, but rather reflect the philologist's poor understanding of textile techniques. Likewise, ancient (male) authors of high social and economic status did probably enjoy textile qualities but did not necessarily know the technicalities of manufacture, or chose deliberately to be vague about them for poetic purposes. It is therefore highly necessary to embark on more precise studies of textile terminologies, in order to be able to embed this body of knowledge into the understanding of the past.

This new volume includes 35 contributions by 41 experts, exploring a wide range of Indo-European languages, as well as Semitic, Sino-Tibetan, and Japonic languages, spoken and written down between the 1st millennium BC and the 1st millennium. They represent a unique and impressive amount of data; in addition, they offer many new approaches to textile terminologies and help to answer crucial questions concerning, among others, the nature of textile terminologies and their position and inclusion into languages, the characterisation of textile terminologies as specialised, technical language or fully integrated in the generalised language; the relationships between textile terms and technologies, geographical provenance, fashion, or social strata; the distribution and mobility of loanwords; the use of textile and garment terms in figurative language and metaphors.

The fields of textile terminology include terms for garments, fabric types, weaves, textile tools, textile craft professions, dyes and dye plants. Several authors draw inspiration and comparative data from iconography, chemical analyses of dyes, and modern ethnographic surveys.

The evidence presented in this volume forms a distinct geographical pattern. In the case of the textile terminological survey of the 3rd and 2nd millennia, most data stemmed from the Levant, Anatolia (Hittite, Kanesh), Egypt, Greece, and the Near East (Mari, Ebla, Mesopotamia), reaching back into India. In the present survey, the focus is re-positioned to the next two millennia, but in the 1st millennium BC, the surveyed regions remain largely the same as in the 3rd

1. Michel & Nosch 2010.

and 2nd millennia BC: the Near East covers most of our knowledge of textile terminology of the 1st millennium BC (Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian palatial and private archives). Investigating this area is important in order to understand how Mesopotamian textile terms found their way in the ‘Age of the Empires’ and how this tradition developed during the 1st millennium BC thanks to the enlargement of commercial networks of Assyria and Babylonia and the cultural encounter that took place in these regions between the old Akkadian-speaking urban elites with groups originating from other regions of the Near East. The Hebrew sources represent another treasure trove over the millennia, and Greece makes a noticeable exception with its rich and diverse textual sources of the second part of the 2nd millennium BC, continuing into Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic cultures, and richly preserved, not in Greece, but in the Greek-speaking settlements of Egypt. Most of our knowledge of textile terminologies in the early 1st millennium AD also stems from Greek, as well as from Latin, but the provenance of these sources is to a very large part Egypt, and continues to be so for the late antique periods as well as the early Arabic inscriptions. Thus we encounter with textile terminology the same peculiar situation of selective conservation of texts as the selective conservation of textiles from the dry conditions of Egypt, and these sources frame and precondition our knowledge of antique and late antique texts — and textiles.

Textile terminologies as a segregated, specialized, technical language, or as part of the general language foundations

The lexical field of textiles may sometimes follow its own rules, which interact with the development of languages. It is often very difficult to provide definitions of words related to textiles or even to classify them. In some ancient languages, generic terms are used for both textiles and garments, and it is not obvious to make a clear distinction of their functions. Modern textile terms do not necessarily match ancient terminologies, and thus it is necessary to retool classifications. Philologists today have the complex task of trying to understand and translate what is hidden behind words supposed to refer to specific materials, shapes, colours, uses, techniques, *etc.*

In a few cases, archaeology and the materiality of textiles can actually assist us in matching terms and textiles. In ideal cases, like the inscribed fabric sample from Fatimid Egypt studied by Anne Regourd and Fiona Handley, the textile itself states what it is and where it comes from. In other exceptional instances, textiles were buried together with inventory lists giving precise descriptions of the clothing items in the burial, and the burial was so well preserved that the garments themselves also came to light. Thus, Le Wang and Feng Zhao could compare a range of clothing terms with the archaeological clothing items, and identify, *e.g.*, the name of a purple jacket thanks to the textual records buried together with it and giving the inventory of the tomb excavated in the Ganzu province.

Several studies carried out on single textile and garment words show that they may convey many different meanings. Stella Spantidaki notes the ambiguity of several ancient Greek terms for textiles tools and fabrics, because of the polysemy of the language. In particular, the word *mitos*, which may have been the generic term for thread or yarn, or the specialised and technical term for linen thread used for heddle leaches. A similar observation is made by Peder Flemestad, Mary Harlow, Berit Hildebrandt, and Marie-Louise Nosch: in the *Edictum Diocletiani* of the years 301 AD some words refer to very specific tools, while others, like *acus*, carry multiple meanings, perhaps linked to its shape and multi-functionality.

When lacking specific terms to refer to some textile materials, qualities or characteristics, like colours, these can be expressed by paraphrases. Thus, according to Ines Bogensperger, the great varieties of purple dye qualities attested in the Greek papyri are rendered with the help of descriptive adjectives or additional nouns. Composite terms are also widely used to describe garments. Moreover, abbreviations of textiles appear in some ancient texts, and even if their meanings were obvious to the ancient authors, they are difficult to understand today, as noticed by Herbert Graßl.

Traditions and technological innovations through textile terminologies

Languages reflect traditional practices and preference for certain materials, colours, shapes, *etc.* According to

Nahum Ben-Yehuda, Hebrew and Aramaic texts contain an extensive Semitic vocabulary referring to flax and linen suggesting that the production of linen textiles is indigenous and age-old in the region. Likewise, Omura and Kizawa explain that the ancient Japanese records focus entirely on bast fibres, pointing to a local vegetal textile product with a long history. Silk comes subsequently, introduced from China and accompanied by a new vocabulary to denote this novel animal fibre.

The identification of specific techniques behind textile terms may be challenging, as noticed by John Peter Wild and Kerstin Droß-Krüpe, when identifying the words for *taqueté* (*vestis polymita*) and tapestry (*vestis plumaria*) in Roman Egypt. In some cases, we can follow the transmission of a technique or its evolution. Indeed, the continuity of a technique is visible through the terminology of the professional craftspeople and their tools. Elena Soriga suggests that similar types of tools were used in the process of fulling, from the Near Eastern Bronze Age to the Classical Greek and Roman times. The only perceptible difference is linked to the raw materials involved in this technique, which are determined by the local ecosystems.

A radical change of vocabulary can be the result of a change of technology. Up to the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, in Mesopotamia, sheep would shed their wool naturally, and the wool was plucked off the animals (*baqāmum*, *qaṭāpum*). Then, following the mutation of the animal, they had to be shorn (*gazāzum*), and Louise Quillien notices accordingly the appearance of iron shears in the texts; thus an indication of a double technological innovation, of new sheep breeds and iron tools. Progress in dyeing techniques is also observable with a growing variety of words to denote colours, as in the classical Armenian language studied by Birgit Olsen.

A section of this volume is dedicated to the textile terminology used by scholars in textile research, and the contributors conclude how important it is to be concise in the technical terms. The words we apply to archaeological artefacts, often borrowed from ancient languages, have an impact on their interpretation. According to Francesco Meo, circular loom weights from the northern shore of the Taranto Gulf dated to the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, which allowed the weaving of dense fabrics, were traditionally referred to by the word *oscillum*; but this term does not

convey the functionality of weaving and thus conveys a wrong meaning. Along the same lines, Felicitas Maeder follows the path and interpretations of *byssus*, from its Semitic origins, entry into Greek and Latin and its afterlife in varied and erroneous Biblical translations. Other words, depicting very specific types of decoration, can be transmitted in the long term with the same meaning, as noticed Maciej Szymaszek with the word *gammadia*, a right-angled motif, used since the end of the 1st millennium AD.

The terminology of fashion and decorations

Toponymic designations of clothes are very frequent and yet often ambiguous since they can refer to many aspects linked to textiles' origin, techniques, decoration or fashion. The geographical origin of words may reflect the introduction of a foreign decoration technique, including new colours. Agnes Korn and Georg Warning notice the replacement in the book on the same line of the word corresponding to *kermes* (insect dye) used in the other books of the Old Testament by a term referring to an Armenian dye and the colour obtained by using it.

Words are transmitted or borrowed and can convey different meanings. When excavating textile terms in dictionaries and encyclopaedia, we perceive the geographic and diachronic deformation of their meaning; in some instances, a new meaning is applied to the word. Felicitas Maeder explains how the ancient Semitic word *byssus*, which denominated fine linen textile in antiquity, was used to designate sea-silk textiles in the 16th century, presumably because of their resemblance. Textile words thus change their meaning over time and also with the introduction of new fashions. Maria Mossakowska-Gaubert studies the Greek vocabulary for tunics in Egypt during the Roman and Byzantine periods: the construction of a new vocabulary accompanied the introduction of tunics with long sleeves and a diversity of the way to wear them.

Textile terminologies as an indicator of social status and origin

The types of textiles documented by texts and images usually reflect high quality and luxury items, those worn by the court and elite members, or exchanged

as diplomatic gifts. They are made of expensive materials, like silk, which was always a luxurious fibre. However, during the Middle Byzantine period, according to Julia Galliker, the great variety of textile terms used in association with silk of a wide range of qualities suggest that silk had become widely available in Constantinople. A social distinction through the use of silk-based material was then made via the development of complex decorative weaving techniques.

Outside the realm of elite textiles, some texts, like the Roman marriage contract papyri from Imperial Egypt listing dowries, including women's wardrobes, give an idea of the garments worn by more common people; these are described by Kerstin Droß-Krüpe who notices a high proportion of red and yellow clothes. Another example is provided by Luigi Malatacca who explores the Neo and Late-Babylonian sources for evidence of ordinary people's clothing, and notes that this terminology is limited and often generic, referring to 'dress' and 'garment'.

Loanwords in the lexical field of textiles

Textile terminologies are informative concerning contacts and influences between peoples, languages and areas through the use of loanwords. A variety of factors can determine the relation between a textile term and the referred item and, consequently, its meaning and later semantic developments, such as the socio-economic context where the item was fabricated, used or purchased, as well as the written practice and the prestige of schools and writers. Some text corpora are especially rich for such an investigation of cultural influences, like for example the rabbinic texts, which reflect traditions from the Late Antiquity Eastern Mediterranean. Nevertheless, as Christina Katsikadeli explains, the identification and interpretation of loanwords in these sources may be affected by the texts' transmission and their various manuscript editions.

The donor languages change according to the considered domain, and loanwords may be more present in specific lexical fields, as for example the one of textiles. In 1st millennium BC Assyrian texts, according to Salvatore Gaspa, Aramaic textile loanwords attest to the presence of skilled Aramaic craftspeople in Assyria. Many of these terms were still in use in

the Late Babylonian dialect and this demonstrates the deep impact of Aramaic in the textile lexical field of the whole East Semitic area. Thus, the chronology of the transfers and borrowings is an important aspect to take into consideration as well as that of the cultural-historical contexts that determined them.

In many cases, it seems that loanwords come with the 'loan thing'. This could be the case for the borrowings observed by Peder Flemestad and Birgit Annette Olsen between Greek and various Italic languages, among which are Sabellic and Latin. The meaning of foreign words was not always obvious, even for those using them, as Miguel Ángel Andrés-Toledo explains concerning the name of a silk textile translated from Avestan to Pahlavi, which needed to be explained by the translator.

Roland Schuhmann demonstrates that the many textile loanwords in Old High German were borrowed primarily from Latin and Old French, and these textile loanwords arrive from the south and from the west into the Old High German area. It is worth noticing that the number of Latin and Old French loanwords increases gradually from the 8th and 12th century. Moreover, the borrowings belong to three specific semantic fields: new and previously unknown materials and their products, garments for clerics and cushions.

The symbolism of textiles and garments and the metaphors they generate

Essential parts of human life are expressed in textile and garment expressions. A recent dimension of textile research is to explore the role of textile technology in the mental universes of the past, in cult, rituals, mythology, metaphors, political rhetoric, poetry and the language of the sciences. Expressions, such as urban *tissue*, the *fabric* of the universe, the *outskirts* of the city, the common *thread*, the time *warp*, the world wide *web*, all belong to the figurative and metaphorical language, which persists today. Also in the past, languages contained such references and they can be identified in a long literary tradition, from Sanscrit, to Greek archaic poetry and Ovid. Stefan Niederreiter has systematically outlined the metaphoric use of textile terminology in the Rigveda, a collection of sacred hymns from

ancient India composed in Vedic Sanskrit. Giovanni Fanfani demonstrates how the textile vocabulary and the vocabulary of music, performance and composition are interwoven, and Oswald Panagl surveys the symbolism in the semantic field of weaving, which by no means has become a dead metaphor but has remained productive from antiquity to the present day. Terms related to textiles constitute a powerful means of conveying religious ideas through sacred texts. Götz König's investigation focuses on those parts of the Avesta, the holy scriptures of Zoroastrianism, that describe items worn by priests and warriors along with other objects, showing how the components of the warriors' clothing were conceptualized as an armour and as offensive/defensive tools in the framework of the Avestan religious symbolism.

We can conclude that these metaphorical and figurative textile expressions are not merely stylistic tools but rooted in cognitive, terminological and experiential realities of the past. They inform us of technical terms, of textile practices in daily life in antiquity, and thus have a strong didactic and rhetorical value in ancient literature. Magdalena Öhrman highlights exactly this practical and tactile aspect of textile manufacture in her demonstration of how Latin poets use sound-play and the rhythm of weaving in their texts, integrated in the stylistic expression of poetic descriptions of textile work.

Another kind of textile terminology is related to the religious, social and legal regulations of clothing. Here Orit Shamir examines the concept of *sha'atnez* which regulates the forbidden blend of animal and plant based product in ancient Israel, including the forbidden blend of wool and linen. Her study also gives interesting insights into how these ancient religious regulations are followed in modern-day Jewish communities in a world dominated by synthetic fibres and characterized by a globalized economy.

Studying textile terms also leads us to the problem of classifying terms and *realia*. Since textiles circulating in antiquity and the techniques used to produce them have disappeared, it is necessary to continue the fruitful dialogue between all scholars with expertise in history, linguistics and material culture studies in

order to achieve a better understanding of the ancient textiles and their characteristics. This dialogue must also include textile craftspeople.

Classifications of textiles, textile-related materials and relevant terms are another important field highlighted in this volume. Starting with an investigation into the use of saffron as dyestuff in antiquity in the light of a recently discovered Lycian inscription, Peter Herz presents a classification of dyestuffs according to how these substances were produced, thus offering an interesting analysis of a relevant aspect of the history of ancient techniques and economic history.

The problems and the opportunities of a classification of textile terms are also highly relevant as regards the preservation of the textile lore of modern and contemporary societies, since traditional textile production and the relevant technical lore accompanying it are dying out not only in Western societies. Through the description of an important digital term bank and the discussion about how to classify textile-related terms and concepts, Susanne Lervad and Tove Engelhardt Mathiassen demonstrate how the combination of terminological studies and information technology can help scholars preserve and communicate the cultural heritage of words and expressions for clothing and textiles. Along similar methodological lines is Kalliope Sarri's paper, which presents a costume term database of 3000 years of the Greek language. The aim of this ongoing multi-thematic project is to collect Greek costume and other textile-related terms from all periods and regions of Greece. Such a multidisciplinary approach will be crucial in illuminating social aspects of clothing production and dress codes in former periods of Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean area.

With the exploration of textile terms we have highlighted an important aspect in textile terminological investigation: that of transmitting the cultural heritage of past civilizations' textiles to academic and non-academic audiences, an objective that can be achieved only through interdisciplinary approaches, the involvement of specialists from different fields, and new contexts of scholarly interaction and discussion.